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Pentagon Plan to Control Scientific Data Disputed

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WASHINGTON, April 8 — Many engineering and scientific associations may be subject to Government efforts to restrict access to research papers that do not contain Government secrets, a Defense Department official said today.

Francis Sobieszczyk, a senior staff assistant in the department's Office of Research and Advanced Technology, made the assertion in an address at the annual symposium of the Society of Photo-Optical Instrumentation Engineers in the Washington suburb of Arlington.

But an official of the American Civil Liberties Union said later that the restrictions were not in accord with the laws the Pentagon official cited.

The society was told by the Defense Department last week that it would have to cancel a dozen unclassified papers scheduled for presentation at

the weeklong conference. Material that contains Government secrets is classified as top secret, secret or confidential, depending on its importance. Material that contains no secrets is "unclassified."

Control Called Essential

Mr. Sobieszczyk said that increased control of unclassified technical information that might have military or space applications was essential to prevent such data from falling into the hands of enemies of the United States.

But Dr. Lewis Larmore, president of the society, said in a telephone interview later that the Defense Department's new restrictions appeared to conflict with past policy statements of senior Pentagon officials.

Allan Adler, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, who attended the symposium, said he questioned the legal authority under which the restrictions on unclassified research were being imposed.

Mr. Sobieszczyk said the meeting of 500 photo-optic engineers and scientists was the first professional gathering on which the information restrictions were being imposed. If the restricting was successful, he said, it would be applied to the meetings of other professional societies that deal with research possibly applying to military or space matters.

In addition to the cancellation of some papers, Defense Department officials also required people attending two dozen other presentations to prove that they were associated with Government programs or companies that do business with the Government, and to certify that they would not export the information presented.

The research by the 5,000 members of the photo-optic society is of special interest to the Pentagon, which pays for much of the research, because of its application to such areas as lasers and the use of satellites to verify arms agreements.

In the last few years the Defense Department has taken a number of steps to try to control audiences for papers presented to such organizations as the American Vacuum Society, the American Chemical Society, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers.

Mr. Sobieszczyk told the symposium today that the new restrictions were authorized by the Export Administration Act and by a provision of the 1984 Defense Authorization Act that limits release of technical information under the Freedom of Information Act where disclosure might reveal details that might have military or space uses.

But Mr. Adler contended that that provision of the Defense Authorization Act "does not give the Pentagon authority to say that unclassified research papers cannot be presented at a professional conference."

Mr. Larmore, the society president, a physicist with the Office of Naval Research in Pasadena, Calif., said in an interview, "We are trying to cooperate with Defense but we don't want to wreck the whole meeting."

He also said he believed the restrictions "conflict to some extent with the Reagan Administration's past policy."

A little less than a year ago Dr. Edith W. Martin, Defense Department Deputy Under Secretary for Research and Engineering, told a meeting of two House Science and Technology subcommittees that the department would use normal classification procedures for controlling "fundamental research" done under contract to the United States Government.

Mr. Sobieszczyk denied that the new restrictions conflicted with Dr. Martin's policy statement because the restriction applied to "unclassified technical data" and not "fundamental research."